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ABSTRACT

Personal contacts students have with their tutors through the telephone tutoring system established at the Open Learning Institute, British Columbia, Canada, were investigated with completing and noncompleting students. Attention was directed to the frequency of contact with tutors and supportive behaviors tutors extend. For the 118 students, the average age was 33 years, and 24 percent were males. Completing and noncompleting groups were defined on the basis of completion of all assignments. No significant differences were found in the frequency with which tutors telephoned students in the two groups. Noncompleters rated tutors more highly than did completers on the item: "I feel my tutor wants me to phone if I have any questions." The frequency with which the two groups of students initiated contact with their tutors was 45 percent for the completer group and 32 percent for the noncompleting group, an insignificant difference. It is suggested that tutors were attuned to the greater need of students in the noncompleter group for guidance. In addition, the similar pattern of student-initiated calls for both groups and the positive ratings given tutors by completers and noncompleters provides a measure of assurance that tutors have been successful in creating a climate of supportiveness for all the students. It is concluded that in distance learning, a teletutoring system allows frequent discussion between tutors and students concerning their academic progress, and personal relationships that promote effective feedback can be fostered. (SW)

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SYMPOSIUM

DISTANCE EDUCATION: INDUSTRIAL OR SOCIAL PROCESS

Distance Education: The Personal Response

by

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Open Learning Institute

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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In this symposium, distance education has been presented as both an industrial and a social process. The present paper continues this discussion by examining the personal contacts students have with their tutors through the telephone tutoring system established at The Open Learning Institute (OLI).

In addition to mail-in assignments, the principle means of interchange between tutors and students is the telephone. OLI pays for a telephone installation in each tutor's home, to be used exclusively for placing and receiving student calls. Tutors are expected to contact each student at the beginning of the course and to schedule three hours per week during which time students are encouraged to contact their tutor for assistance.

Telephone communications with students are made on an individual basis involving what Flink (1975) referred to as 'tele-tutoring': tutors call students to check on their progress, explain assignments and when required, encourage students' commitment to an independent course of study. In turn, students may call the tutor to clarify requirements for practice exercises and written assignments, or obtain guidance on the best way to approach their study materials.

BACKGROUND

One of the assumptions underlying adoption of the tele-tutoring system was that personalized attention from a tutor would promote student retention rates. The telephone allows frequent contact with students and offers the tutor an opportunity to establish a personal relationship with students. Such a view is consistent with developed conceptual schemes of the college attrition process (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975). In Tinto's (1975) model, informal contact between faculty and students is an essential element in promoting student commitment and persistence. A limited number of empirical

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studies have presented evidence to suggest that frequency of informal contact with faculty is positively related to student attrition/completion rates (e.g. Gekoski and Schwartz, 1961; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977; 1980; Spady, 1971).

These studies also indicate that the nature of informal contact between faculty and students must be considered in relation to persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) for example, examined six categories of student-faculty interactions:

- Academic or course information
- Discuss career concerns
- Resolve a personal problem
- Discuss intellectual matters
- Discuss a campus issue
- Socialize informally

Of these, contacts focusing on intellectual or course related matters contributed most to the discrimination of completing and non-completing students.

In a distance learning setting, the burden of instruction is carried by the course materials. The primary task of the tutor is to provide students with feedback concerning their academic progress. In view of Pascarella and Terenzini's (1977) findings, 'tele-tutors' are ideally positioned to provide the type of contact most likely to influence student completion rates.

Feedback by telephone provides timely correction and redirection to students; and because it involves two-way communication with a tutor, students' understanding is confirmed, clarified and reinforced. Nevertheless, to be effective, feeback must occur in a context that is supportive and

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encouraging. To the extent that students' anxieties and concerns are considered, they are better able to concentrate on the structure, content and meaning of the tutor's message. Store and Armstrong (1981) draw on the work of Gibb (1961) to describe a climate of supportiveness as including the following categories of tutor behavior:

- Description
- Problem orientation
- Spontaneity
- Empathy
- Provisionalism

The presence of some or all of these behaviors suggests the well-studied dimension of teacher 'warmth' and portrays an instructor who is friendly, integrative, affiliative, and nurturant (McKeachie, Lin, Milholland and Isaacson, 1966). From the perspective of the tele-tutoring task of providing feedback to students, tutor supportiveness defines an essential prerequisite for effective communication.

OBJECTIVES

On the basis of previous research and observation we should expect student retention rates to be enhanced by the frequency and positive quality of the interactions between tutors and students. To study further the relationship between tutor practice and student persistence at OLI, we gathered data from available sources to address two questions:

1. Are there differences in the frequency with which tutors contact completing and non-completing students?
2. Are there differences in the supportive behaviors tutors extend to completing and non-completing students?

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PROCEDURES

Data for the present study were obtained from a larger survey conducted at OLI in the Fall Semester, 1981. That survey studied tele-tutoring practices of 18 tutors employed in three program areas: University; Career, Technical and Vocational; and Adult Basic Education.

Respondents

Relevant data on 118 students were available from the larger study. The average age of respondents was 33, twenty-four percent of whom were males. From the 118 students considered in the study, completing and non-completing groups were defined on the basis of assignment completion. Those who handed in all assignments (and thus eligible to write the final exam) were placed in the completer category. This definition of persistence was chosen because many adult learners enroll not to obtain course credit, but to acquire knowledge and skills from working through the course materials.

Telphone Contacts

The frequency of telephone exchanges between tutors and students was determined from long-distance telephone receipts. Consequently, we did not have a complete picture of the telephone 'traffic' between tutors and students. However, long-distance telephone records provided a reasonable index of contact for comparing completing and non-completing groups of students.

Tutor Appraisal Items

To assess the climate of support established by tutors, student perceptions were obtained from four questionnaire items:

- I feel my tutor wants me to telephone if I have any questions
- My tutor is friendly
- My tutor treats me with respect
- My tutor helps motivate me to do well in the course

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On each item, students were asked to rate their tutor on a 5-point (strongly) agree to (strongly) disagree scale.

RESULTS

The extent and amount of contact tutors had with completing and non-completing students is shown in Table 1. The proportion in each group actually contacted by tutors was marginally higher for non-completers (66 percent) than for completers (60 percent). Considering those students tutors were able to contact, no significant differences were found in the frequency with which they telephoned students in the completing and non-completing groups. The frequency of tutor-student exchange over the four month period of the semester is shown in Figure 1 and indicates a generally similar pattern of increased contact for both groups; however, this trend is less obvious for non-completing students.

To determine if there were differences in tutors' supportive relations with completers and non-completers, a comparison was made of both groups' tutor ratings. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis. Among the four items considered, non-completers rated tutors more highly than did completers on the item:

'I feel my tutor wants me to phone if I have any questions.'

This suggests that tutors were attuned to the greater need of students in the non-completer group for guidance and had established a positive tone that fostered dialogue with these students.

A second view of tutor receptiveness and support of students was obtained from the frequency with which completing and non-completing students initiated contact with their tutor. The analysis involved 45 percent of the completer group and 32 percent of the non-completer group. The results are included in Table 3 and indicate no significant differences in the amount of tutor contact between completing and non-completing groups of students. Figure 2

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presents the four month semester breakdown of student-tutor calls. It may be seen that the pattern of contact is very similar for both groups. The sudden decrease in contacts initiated by students in the completer group for the fourth month suggests a growing independence among these students as they complete assignments and prepare for the exam. For the non-completer group, the decline in the number of calls they initiated for the same period presumably reflects a lack of confidence in their ability to undertake the final examination; or it may indicate a decision on the part of at least some students that they had achieved their personal goals in completing assignments to the third month.

In any event, the similar pattern of student-initiated calls for both groups and the positive ratings given tutors by completers and non-completers provides a measure of assurance that tutors have been successful in creating a 'climate of supportiveness' for their students -- both completers and non-completers.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature on college attrition indicated that personal contacts with faculty promote student commitment and persistence. Essential to this relationship are the extent and nature of faculty-student interactions: frequent, informal contacts that stress course-related matters are associated with higher completion rates. However, effectiveness of these exchanges as instructional feedback is enhanced to the extent that instructors are responsive and supportive in their interactions with students. In distance learning, a tele-tutoring system allows frequent discussion between tutors and students concerning their academic progress. At the same time, personal relationships that promote effective feedback can be fostered.

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The present study examined both aspects of tele-tutoring practice in relation to assignment completion of students enrolled in a distance learning program. The results of the study indicated that tutors contacted non-completing students as frequently as they did completing students. Additionally, they appear to have established equally supportive relationships with both student groups.

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Table 1

Tutor - Student Telephone Contacts: Semester Totals

Group	$\bar{X}$	SD	n	t (71)*
Completer	2.17	2.05	48	.19
Non-Completer	2.08	1.50	25	

* p >.05

Table 2

Student Ratings of Tutor Behavior[a]

Item	Completer X	Completer SD	Non-Completer X	Non-Completer SD
1. I feel that my tutor wants me to telephone if I have any questions.[b]	4.19	.62	4.55	.57
2. My tutor is friendly.	4.58	.55	4.54	.56
3. My tutor treats me with respect.	4.41	.57	4.50	.51
4. My tutor helps motivate me to do well in the course.	4.21	.68	4.07	.85

a $T^2_{91} = 13.62$ $p < .05$

b $t_{90} = -2.66$ $p < .05$

Table 3

Student-Tutor Telephone Contacts: Semester Totals

Group	$\bar{X}$	SD	n	t (46)*
Completer	2.94	2.62	36	-.43
Non-Completer	3.33	3.03	12	

* p >.05

Figure 1

Mean Frequency of Telephone Exchanges Between Tutors and Students for Each Month in the Semester

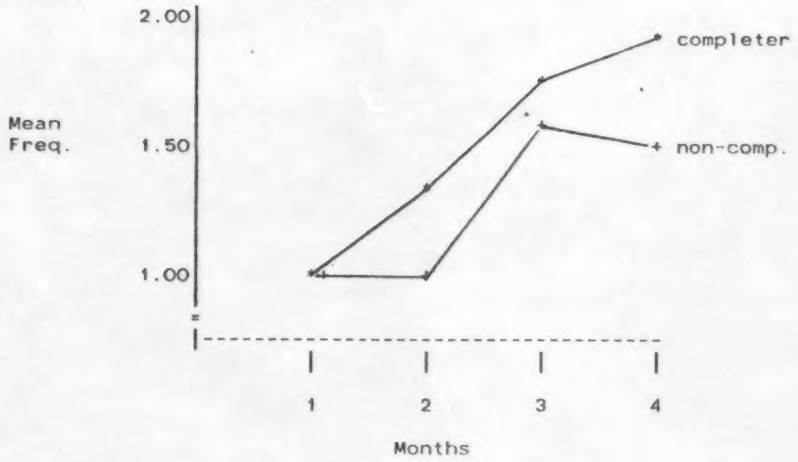
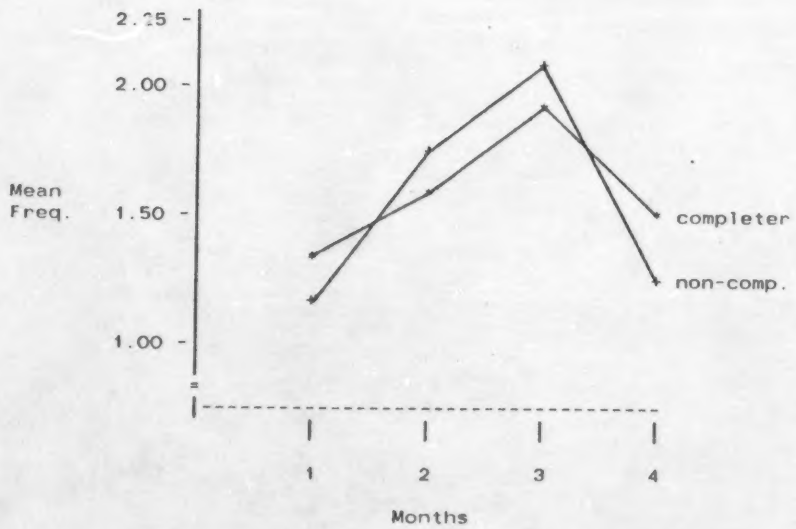


Figure 2

Mean Frequency of Telephone Exchanges Between Students and Tutors for Each Month in the Semester



Appendix

1. Means and standard deviations for monthly breakdown of tutor-student contacts (Figure 1).

Group	Month			
	1	2	3	4
Completers				
$\bar{X}$	1.11	1.32	1.71	1.83
SD	.68	.82	1.21	2.04
Non-Completers				
$\bar{X}$	1.14	1.14	1.57	1.50
SD	.36	.36	1.13	1.23

2. Means and standard deviations for monthly breakdown of student-tutor contacts (Figure 2).

Group	Month			
	1	2	3	4
Completers				
$\bar{X}$	1.29	1.57	1.95	1.47
SD	.47	.94	1.47	.72
Non-Completers				
$\bar{X}$	1.20	1.71	2.12	1.25
SD	.45	1.11	1.36	.50